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Cover photo by William Vincent

My Bubble of Eternity



I met one of our writers recently. In person. That can be a rare thing these days. He doesn't live just down the street, or a town away. No pony express delivers his latest poem in beautiful calligraphy on handmade paper. Actually, he hits his computer's "send" button from his home in the Caribbean and, in an instant, I have a missive of beauty and love sitting in my inbox, set in a calligraphic typeface that serves as today's automated version of yesteryear's labor of love. But this is not a story about nostalgia, or change, or how the world grows continually smaller. It's about that which never changes, that which is both the source and the essence of all life. His word for it is Silence. I call it Love. Many call it God.

When our poet came by to visit—because, as happens in this ever-smaller world filled with synchronicities, he did grow up in the next town and was home for a visit—we first shook hands, as polite people do. But the sense of peace, of inner stillness, and of love that radiated from him was so powerful that the connecting of hands both communicated that love to me, as a companion on this journey of life, and reconnected me to my own essence of

love and peace—the essence of which we are all made.

The next few hours of conversation had a timeless quality, like a bubble of eternity, as we discussed the experience of Silence as the source of all being, out of which comes all creation. We talked about the universality of this, through all time, in all faith traditions. We talked about Love, Truth, and God as interchangeable words for Silence. Semantics can be cumbersome but it seems that every faith tradition is centered in a belief in Silence, God, or Love as the source of all being.

I spent that afternoon bathed in a warm glow of light and love and incredible peace. It felt so simple. So simply wonderful. Why do we live any other way? Because we can't spend all our days in bubbles of eternity, I suppose. But we can choose a path of love and inner stillness, each one of us, no matter what suffering we also find along our way. Our poet has made this choice. He says he feels that he is always connected to the Silence, no matter where he is or what he is doing. I can say that I have seen both the beauty and the love that result. And he is only one person. Imagine . . .

These ideas of stillness and love, and connecting to one's soul or source of being, are woven throughout our journal this month, as are themes of life's value in all its forms throughout nature. Poised beautifully in their midst is one of our poet's poems, titled "One Divine Moment," by silent lotus.

In this season of warm sunshine and new growth, may you find your way home to the love that is your essence, and enjoy many timeless moments as bubbles of eternity.

L'CHAIM!



Rachel Naomi Remen



Many years ago my grandfather gave me a silver wine goblet so small that it holds no more than a thimbleful of wine. Exquisitely engraved into its bowl is a bow with long ribbon streamers. It was made in Russia long ago. He gave it to me during one of the many afternoons when we sat together at the kitchen table in my parents' home memorizing phrases from his old books and discussing the nature of life. I was quite young then, no more than five or six, and when I became restless, he would revive my attention by bringing out the sacramental Concord grape wine he kept in the back of the refrigerator. He would fill my little beribboned wineglass with Manischewitz and then put a splash of wine into his own, a big silver ceremonial cup, generations old. Then we would offer a toast together. At the time, the only other celebration I knew was singing "Happy Birthday" and blowing out the candles. I loved this even better.

"L'Chaim!", from *MY GRANDFATHER'S BLESSINGS* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., copyright © 2000 by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. Used by permission of Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

My grandfather had taught me the toast we used. It was a single Hebrew word, *L'Chaim* (pronounced *le CHI yeem*), which he told me meant "To life!" He always said it with great enthusiasm. "Is it to a happy life, Grandpa?" I had asked him once. He had shaken his head no, "It is just 'To life!' Neshume-le," he told me.

At first, this did not make a lot of sense to me, and I struggled to understand his meaning. "Is it like a prayer?" I asked uncertainly.

"Ah no, Neshume-le," he told me. "We pray for the things we don't have. We already have life."

"But then why do we say this before we drink the wine?" He smiled at me fondly. "Grandpa!" I said, suddenly suspicious. "Did you make it up?" He chuckled and assured me that he had not. For thousands of years all over the world people have said this same word to each other before drinking wine together. It was a Jewish tradition.

I puzzled about this last for some time. "Is it written in the Bible, Grandpa?" I asked at last. "No, Neshume-le," he said, "it is written in people's hearts." Seeing the confusion on my face, he told me that *L'Chaim!* meant that no matter what difficulty life brings, no matter how hard or painful or unfair life is, life is holy and worthy of celebration. "Even the wine is sweet to remind us that life itself is a blessing."

It has been almost fifty-five years since I last heard my grandfather's voice, but I remember the joy with which he toasted Life and the twinkle in his eye as he said *L'Chaim!* It has always seemed remarkable to me that such a toast could be offered for generations by a people for whom life has not been easy. But perhaps it can only be said by such people, and only those who have lost and

suffered can truly understand its power.

L'Chaim! is a way of living life. As I've grown older, it seems less and less about celebrating life and more about the wisdom of choosing life. In the many years that I have been counseling people with cancer, I have seen people choose life again and again, despite loss and pain and difficulty. The same immutable joy I saw in my grandfather's eyes is there in them all.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



Dharma Bugs

Lhaktong Sönam

Heading out the front door for a weekend away, keys in hand, I pause in the foyer and turn back toward my living room. "Okay, Charlie," I say aloud. "Enjoy the weekend. No wild parties. Don't trash the house." But Charlie makes no promises. He just clings to the ceiling above my living room shrine, as any quarter-inch-long black spider would.

It's not that I make pets of spiders, really—or of any of the other six- and eight-legged critters that occasionally wander through my apartment. More and more, though, I think of making friends with them as spiritual practice.

A basic commitment within the Dharma, or Buddhist path, is not to kill any sentient being. One of the Buddhist monastic retreat traditions began when, during ancient



Lhaktong Sönam

Lhaktong Sönam lives, writes, and photographs near Princeton, New Jersey. Her sunset photo graced our April 2004 journal cover and her story "Not the Ripples" was in the same issue. Her photos can be seen regularly on our web site at www.sacredjourney.org.

India's rainy season, monks stayed indoors rather than risk stepping on the many bugs underfoot. For that matter, the first precept for Buddhist lay practitioners is, "I take upon myself the training of not harming life."

While all faiths (and all legal systems) have injunctions against murder, most of us think nothing of smacking mosquitoes, squashing spiders, stepping on cockroaches. They're unpleasant. They're inconvenient. They might bite us or get in our food or carry germs. Why not get rid of them?

One traditional Tibetan Buddhist answer: In an infinite number of lives since beginningless time, all beings, including insects, have at one time or another been our mothers. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche wrote, "When they were our parents, these beings' only thought was to raise us with the greatest possible kindness, protecting us with great love. . . All of these beings, who have been so kind to us, want to be happy. . . None of them want to suffer." To help us rouse bodhicitta—the awakened heart/mind of compassion, the core of enlightenment—we contemplate gratitude toward all mother beings and commit to help them liberate themselves from suffering.

Another reason not to kill bugs is that doing so reinforces aggression and self-centeredness. If I swat a fly—whether because its buzzing annoys me, or because I think it might carry germs, or out of simple disgust—I'm protecting my space and arranging the world for my convenience, at the cost of another being's life. Even such small aggressive acts ingrain callousness and selfishness. Such attitudes, the Buddha taught, are part of the origin of all human suffering. The more we indulge them, the more we perpetuate suffering. So we try to eliminate these attitudes, even in the smallest ways.



Paul Schrock

When I began to study the Dharma, I understood these notions in principle. But I've always been nearly phobic about insects. In my first childhood nightmare, I walked into a swarm of wasps. In my recent adult life, the sight of a two-inch cockroach in a bathtub left me completely unwilling to get in that shower for several days. The truth is, I hated bugs.

Then one Sunday morning, as I sat in my living room enjoying the summer breeze through the balcony's screen door, I heard *thwick ... thwick ... thwick* and looked up. A large yellow jacket banged against the ceiling above my head. Adrenaline surging, I leapt off the sofa and bolted from the room. How could I reach that thing without getting stung? Could I smack it with a broom? Could I be sure of killing it? What if I missed and just enraged it?

I had the broom in my hand before I recalled some of the discussions at the sittings I'd been attending. *Okay*, I thought doubtfully, *maybe I don't really have to kill you*. *Maybe I can just shoo you out the door*. So I stepped over to the balcony, slid the door open, and raised the broom for a swing at the wasp. But before I could make another move, the wasp zipped through the open door and was gone. *What? It only wanted out?* The thought spurred a sudden, completely unexpected sympathy: *How awful to be stuck in an alien place, struggling, literally beating your head against the wall*.

It was a sentiment I remembered during a later visit to a Buddhist abbey, where I watched a young monk standing at the kitchen sink after dinner. As patiently and delicately as any surgeon with a scalpel, he was using a matchstick to try to right a tiny brown beetle that lay struggling on its back in a puddle of soapy water. I was struck by his evident mindfulness that he must not hurt the little thing while trying to help it.

Another beetle benefited, some months later, from that young monk's efforts. During a week at a retreat center in the woods, as I passed by the front window on my way to a study session, I glanced outside and saw movement: six thick black legs waving in the air. Lying in the driveway was a *big* beetle, the size of a golf ball cut in half, big enough to draw attention through a window twenty feet away—and it was helpless, stuck on its back. I started to walk on, and then I remembered the monk in the kitchen. *Oh, all right*, I thought.

I stepped outside and suppressed a shiver as I leaned down toward the beetle. Yes, it really was big and ugly. Picking up a stick I judged long enough to keep me at a safe distance, I reached down and gave the beetle a flick. It staggered away as I flung the stick into the grass and went back inside. Ten seconds later, a car came up the drive; I watched it roll right over the spot where the beetle had been stuck. I wasn't yet sure I believed this beetle had been my mother, but the idea that whether or not I took a moment to attend to its needs was actually a matter of its life or death—that notion transfixed me.

During the rest of that retreat week I perfected the art of upending a glass over a bug caught indoors, slipping a sheet of paper under it, taking it outdoors and releasing it. I found that, at high summer in the woods, there are a lot of bugs, each uglier than the next. I also found that they're all smaller than I, all relatively fragile, and, when they make their way indoors, all trapped in a world not their own. So by day I ushered bugs out, and by night, as I turned out the lamp to go to sleep, fireflies crawled up the outside of my screen window, flashing at me a clear and potent light in utter darkness.

Today, when I find a bug in the house—even a big one

that makes me shudder, and many still do—I greet it. Sometimes I give it a name and live with it for a few days. Larry the silverfish, for instance, camped in my bathtub for three days. I kept finding him there in the morning, taking him out in a dish, showering, and putting him back in the tub when I finished, until I decided that this was all a little silly and it might be kinder just to guide him back down the drain, toward home.

If I can't work around a particular specimen (as in Larry's case), I put my catch-and-release system into play. If it's a small out-of-the-way bug I find, I go about my business and leave it alone. As for Charlie the spider, he actually became my meditation partner: I'd settle onto my cushion in front of the shrine, look up to greet him, do my practice, and dedicate the merit of that practice to all sentient beings, especially Charlie.

Does learning to be kind to bugs constitute an important step in my Buddhist practice? Maybe it really will, over time, make me more compassionate. It surely has taught me that I can let go of some of my ideas about what's going to inconvenience or harm me, and stop being so invested in my own comfort that I'm willing to kill for it.

I've learned too that sometimes when a spider like Charlie parks for days, unmoving, in the middle of the ceiling, it may be dying. And so when, after my weekend away, I walk in the front door and look toward my shrine to say, "Hi, Charlie!" it isn't a great surprise that he's gone—perhaps back outdoors, perhaps to a next time as someone's parent. I'm sorry to see him go; I appreciated his company, and his reminder, when I sat. I had kind of hoped he'd stick around. Then again, everything's impermanent.

But that's another teaching.

P O E T R Y



One Divine Moment

In
The
Sweet
Sanctuary
Of this shade
We heard the birds
The leaves in the breeze
And waves as they played
And in one divine moment
We felt our hearts melt
Suddenly we knew
How nature
Prayed

silent lotus

The path of silent lotus is an international one. As a spiritual advisor he accepts requests for private sessions, seminars, and retreats. The stream of poetry that flows through him is archived under the title "Listening To Love" and the visual arts as "Icons Of Silence." You are most welcome to visit www.silentlotus.net or email info@silentlotus.net.

Wilderness

When Jesus was twelve,
his parents lost him in Jerusalem.

Finally they found him by
going back to where they started—the temple.
So if you want to experience this noble birth,
you have to go back to the starting place,
the core out of which you came.

The crowds where Mary and Joseph looked
but couldn't find him are like
your soul's activities: memory, understanding,
will, imagination, sense perception.

Believe me—it's not there!

The divine birth must come
flooding up within you from
what is already God within.

Your own efforts must be on hold,
the soul and its helpers
at God's service.

You cannot do better than to
go into the darkness within,
the unknowing and unknown,
which are nothing more than
the potential for and origin of
sensing itself, through which
you become complete.

Pursue this potentiality
until you are alone in the
darkness of unself-consciousness.

Track every clue there,
never retracing your steps.
The real Word of eternity
resounds only in the solitude
of one who has become a wilderness,
desolated and removed from
all thought of self and other.

~ Meister Eckhart

Soft and Yielding

At birth all people are soft and yielding.
At death they are hard and stiff.
All green plants are tender and yielding.
At death they are brittle and dry.
When hard and rigid
We consort with death.
When soft and flexible,
We affirm greater life.

~ Lao Chu

P I L G R I M A G E



Walking through Soul

Tom Cowan



When I walk through the woods, I end up talking to myself. No, not end up. The internal dialogue usually begins within the first few minutes. I make plans, fret, scold myself or others, review arguments I lost, occasionally outline my deepest thoughts for some real or imagined presentation. It's not always useless chatter, but it distracts me and I fail to notice the gnarled oaks, the boulders with craggy faces, the sudden rock outcrops with dramatic views of the river, the mountains in the distance, the clearings.

I will discover myself standing on a magnificent rocky outcrop, talking incessantly to myself about the best time to wax my car or wondering what it would be like to live in a culture that had no word for time. Then I suddenly become aware of the magnificent view before me and realize how totally oblivious I was to the beauties and powers of nature, which are the very reason I walk in the woods in the first place.

Excerpted from YEARNING FOR THE WIND by Tom Cowan © 2003 • Reprinted with permission of New World Library • www.newworldlibrary.com

Nature, however, always finds some way to interrupt my internal chatter. She'll trip me on a root, or turn my foot on a stone, or swipe my eye with a low-hanging branch, and I'll remember. But within minutes, I forget again, jaunting on as if the woods were not really there, as if resolving to wax my car before winter were more important.

I should really be better at hiking in the woods. I have been hiking in the woods since before I could walk. My parents took me into the Missouri Ozarks when I was a baby who still viewed the woods—and everything around me—as part of me. Of course, like all growing children, I stopped seeing the world this way. We all do. We create the Great Split between ourselves and nature, thinking we are different, or removed, or even alien to the natural world. I must have done a good job of it because I can spend hours in the woods and never get out of my own head.

There are many spiritual practices that attempt to remove this dualism of the Me and the Not-Me and to recover and strengthen that sense of wholeness and oneness that we knew intuitively as children. I have tried many of these over the years with varying success. Clearly I am not an expert at it.

Of course, we don't ever really lose this sense of oneness with nature. We still shudder in delight at a sunset behind the mountains, catch our breath seeing the change of light on the river, and thrill to the ever-moving cloud patterns sweeping the sky. In such moments, we know that there really is no duality in all this, that on some mystical level we are the river and the setting sun, we are the clouds above the hills. But our internal chatter, like some inner demon who despises mysticism, derails those moments of magic and grace.



In a medieval document known as *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, the Welsh Druid and mystic Taliesin says: "I adore my God, my Strengthener, who infused through my head a Soul to direct me with its seven faculties: fire, earth, water, air, mist, flowers, and southerly wind." Sometimes I try to recite this as I hike through the woods, to hold this vision that the elements through which I walk are the powers of my soul. If only I could always be hiking this Great Mystery: assured that the hills, rivers, trees, and clouds are the faculties of my soul extended beyond my head, my body, my feet, even beyond the footprints I leave in the dust of the trail behind me.

My soul can hike farther than I can, if my thinking mind will only give it free rein. The twelfth-century German mystic Hildegard of Bingen would have said that my soul could hike on forever. She put it this way: "Just as the heart is hidden in the human body, so is the body surrounded by the powers of the soul because these reach to the ends of the earth."

To the ends of the earth!

I don't tote my soul through the woods as if it were an uncomfortable backpack. My soul carries me. Along trails, up cliffs, down to the river, to the far mountains, to the setting sun, beyond the wisps of cloud turning pink in the west. Air, fire, water, earth, mist, flowers, and southerly wind. These are the stuff of soul.

It is not the woods I hike through. I hike through the field of power around me that I call my soul, even though at this moment, in this place, I may call it "the woods."

When I walk through the woods, I end up scolding myself for being so oblivious to trees, air, rocks, river, my soul.

P R A Y E R S



Let Me Walk in Beauty

Chief Yellow Lark (1887)

Oh, Great Spirit

Whose voice I hear in the winds,
And whose breath gives life to all the world,
Hear me! I am small and weak,
I need your strength and wisdom.

Let me walk in beauty

And make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.

Make my hands respect the things you have made

And my ears sharp to hear your voice.

Make me wise so that I may understand
The things you have taught my people.

Let me learn the lessons you have

Hidden in every leaf and rock.

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother,

But to fight my greatest enemy

~myself.

Make me always ready to come to you

With clean hands and straight eyes,

So when life fades, as the fading sunset,

My Spirit may come to you without shame.

Chief Yellow Lark was a Native American missionary and medicine man in the Lakota tribe.

Small Prayer

Susi Richardson

May patience temper
my impulse to flee.

May all learning
deliver me
to unexpected places.

May I recognize
my guides, benevolent, wise,
And may my comfort with surprise
grow like a child:
in glorious summer bursts.

Susi Richardson is a poet and writer living in New Hampshire with her family. She takes special interest in Native American and Eastern spiritual traditions, and is currently exploring mandalas and labyrinths, two ancient, sacred forms of meditation and personal discovery.

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE



Looking At the Walls

Patrick Carroll

My name is Patrick Carroll and I am doing a fifteen-year prison sentence. I first came into contact with meditation in 1992 when I had just finished a sentence of four-and-a-half years. I had only been out a week and was finding it very hard coping with society. My brother invited me to a meditation group he was going to. 'I'll try anything once.' So off I went. To my surprise all the people there were old age pensioners. I listened to the priest who was the facilitator and he explained about the mantra maranatha. What I learned that night was that if you sit still and say the mantra with your breathing all your worries are put on hold. Before I learned to meditate my thoughts would riot like a video in my head. Little did I know that by going to the group I would learn a lesson that would help me through some of the hardest and darkest days in my life. I started this sentence in England for armed robbery. I was finding it very hard and felt really alone since the prison officers were giving me a hard time because I was Irish. I spent many months in

Patrick Carroll has five more years to serve in prison and has been moved to a better facility in Dublin. He is known there as "the boy who meditates" and so he continues to be faithful to this discipline of prayer. This story was first printed in the Christian Meditation Newsletter, International Edition, Fall, 2002.

the segregation unit in solitary confinement. My thoughts were running amok. I had a hard road to travel and it was driving me mad. I was feeding into all my negative thoughts. I was losing the plot. Going around the bend. Till one day I was on punishment sitting in a cell with matting in it and only a chair looking at the walls. I was really angry. So I started breathing with deep breaths and out of nowhere the mantra stepped in: Maranatha. I did not know then but it was a prompting of the Spirit. I was doing 23 hours a day behind the door in the segregation unit. I started keeping fit by doing press-ups, sit-ups and stretching. Then I'd meditate.

After a few weeks things started to change. People treated me differently. My spirit started to shine and people could see the change in me. That was in 1996. I've put this sentence to good use and have done lots of education courses and passed my leaving certification. I find that meditation helps to clear the head before studying and opens up the mind. It lets you open your heart to let God in and out. Sometimes we build walls around our hearts because we've been hurt too much and we stop letting people in. We try to think things out all the time and never look to our hearts for the answer. Like the story of God hiding himself in the heart because that's where people would never look, that's where I found God—where he'd been all along. And through the grace of God I've learned to love myself again. It's so simple. Just "be still and know that I am God."

Breathing is very important. When you get the breathing and the mantra running together you end up in the here and now. The thoughts will still come. They're like a long train with carriages. Just let them come and go and don't hold onto the thoughts. Just return to the mantra.

It's the only thing that no one can take away from me. And now that I have found God I am never alone. Things start to happen in your life. I don't ask God for things anymore. He knows what I need and what's best for me. I thought I'd never see the end of this sentence. I needed this sentence. I never thought I'd hear myself saying that! But everything happens for a reason. God Bless.

Note:

1. "*Maranatha*" is an Aramaic word of invocation meaning "Come, O Lord." Its four even syllables make it a balanced, rhythmic word that fits well with the rhythm of the breath in meditation. Some consider it one of the oldest Christian prayers.
2. "*Leaving certification*" represents the completion of educational coursework while in prison.

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION:



A Primer

Louise Hutner

"The whole purpose of life, wherever you are and whatever you're doing, is to seek God; in other words, to seek that wholeness and depth and fullness of being which we are created for." Fr. Laurence Freeman

Christian meditation is an ancient form of contemplative prayer whose purpose was and is to seek God, and the fullness of being for which we were created. It is a prayer practice rooted in tradition: in the Gospels, the teachings of the early Christian Church, and the work of the Desert Fathers. While its roots are deep, it is a practice that withered over the centuries, becoming the province of monks and nuns, until its revival in the last fifty years. It had been either forgotten or misunderstood as something foreign, a practice from another tradition like Buddhism.

Fr. John Main, an English Benedictine monk who died in 1982, re-introduced Christian meditation as a very simple, yet profoundly deep and contemplative, form of prayer. Fr. Laurence Freeman, also a Benedictine monk and the current Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation, is continuing the work of his close friend to revive this ancient way of spiritual growth and communion with God.

"The reason why . . . we meditate," says Fr. Laurence, "is that the spirit of God, the spirit of the creator of the universe, dwells in our hearts, and in silence is loving to all." He says that the goal of meditation "is the vision of God, is union with God . . . is to open up the whole of your life into a state of continuous mindfulness, of continuous prayer, of a continuous and deepening sense and vision of the presence of God."

Those who practice Christian meditation would say that prayer is not simply talking with God or thinking about God, but learning to be with God. It is both as simple and as difficult as that—to bring the mind to some greater stillness, to move from the mind to the heart which is where we truly exist in the present and where we are one with God. This form of prayer is not meant to replace other forms of prayer, but to enhance and deepen them.

Fr. John said that meditation is as natural to the spirit as breathing is to the body. So when we meditate, we are doing something our body and spirit were created to do together. To bring the mind to stillness, and to move from the mind to the heart, Christian meditators take a sacred word, a mantra, and repeat it continuously during the period of meditation, which is typically twenty to thirty minutes, twice a day.

The mantra recommended by Fr. John is the word "maranatha" which is an Aramaic word (the language spoken by Jesus) meaning "Come, O Lord." Because it is a foreign word, we have no thoughts attached to it so it does not encourage us to think. It is a balanced, rhythmic word that fits well with the rhythm of the breath, and it is one of the oldest Christian prayers and a very sacred word.

Fr. Laurence explains the purpose of a mantra further as he describes the challenges of meditation:

The first thing in meditation is to sit, to sit still . . . Then you begin the real work of meditation which is the inner work of stillness and silence. The first thing you discover when you're sitting here now silent and still is that your mind is neither silent nor still. Somebody once described the mind as like a tree full of monkeys jumping from branch to branch . . . What you do need at this point is a way through the distraction. And the way is, in this tradition, to take a word, a sacred word, a short phrase, or a mantra, to repeat it continually in the mind and heart during the time of meditation. As you say the mantra, you're letting go of your thoughts, your desires, your fantasies, your fears, your anxieties, all of which we cling to, or cling to us, and we also let go of our plans and our memories. By letting go of the thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future and all our daydreams, the mantra allows us to slip into the place where we really exist, which is in the present moment. (*From an interview with Fr. Laurence on the Australian TV program "Compass" on ABC TV, October 20, 2002, available online at www.abc.net.au/compass/s706523.htm*)

There are many similarities between Christian meditation and Eastern forms of meditation, and there are distinctive differences as well. The philosophy and purpose of meditation within a given tradition are specific to that tradition, and are described in the language of that tradition, but the common threads are many. At the core of most religions is a teaching of simplicity and stillness, of transcendence and unity with the divine. Meditation, whether Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise, can be thought of as a form of prayer that is at once both beautifully individual and universal. Ultimately, it can perhaps be the simplest of unifying forces among humankind.

Note: For more information on Christian Meditation, see the World Community for Christian Meditation web site at www.wccm.org.





ILLUMINATIONS



If thy heart were right, then every creature would be a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine. There is no creature so small and abject, but it reflects the goodness of God.

~ *Thomas 'A Kempis*

Bread feeds the body, indeed, but flowers feed also the soul.

~ *The Koran*

So will I build my altar in the fields,
And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be,
And the sweet fragrance that the wild flower yields
Shall be the incense I will yield to thee.

~ *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush
afire with God:

But only he who sees takes off his shoes.

~ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

Our religion keeps reminding us that we aren't just will and thoughts. We're also sand and wind and thunder. Rain. The seasons. All those things. You learn to respect everything because you are everything. If you respect yourself, you respect all things.

~ *Least Heat Moon*

Walk softly.
Speak tenderly.
Pray fervently.
~ *Anonymous*

I have seen nothing more conducive to righteousness than solitude. He who is alone sees nothing but God, and if he sees nothing but God, nothing moves him but the will of God.

~ *Traditional Sufi Teaching*

There is always a radiance in the soul of man, untroubled like the light in a lantern in a wild turmoil of wind and tempest.

~ *Plotinus, Enneads*

Think not of God, my children, as a great tyrant sitting away up there in Heaven removed from you. Why, look down! There is a flower, and a blade of grass, and a stream, and a grain of sand—and that is God, too! He is there! He is everywhere!

~ *Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760)*

We did not weave the web of life—we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

~ *Chief Seattle*

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

~ *Marcel Proust*

It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves.

~ *Sir Edmund Hillary*

KALI AND THE HIBISCUS:



The Dark Goddess in the Pruning Shears

Suzin Green



Lady of the Plants, they say you are in everything and I know this is true because I feel you in the song of my breath moving through me, singing me into countless seasons, from seed to bud to bloom and back to seed again.

There was a time I earned my living teaching music and that was when the hibiscus, a gift from a student, came into my life. It was small and, to my eyes, a rather plain-looking plant, set in a green plastic pot. I had no idea it was a hibiscus, the plant whose large red blooms are sacred to the goddess *Kali*, the fierce, sword-wielding goddess of the Indian tradition.

I set it in a sunny spot, watered it once a week, and gave it a bit of plant food now and then. Beyond that I didn't pay it much attention. To tell the truth, the plant bored me. It didn't

Suzin Green maintains a private practice in Princeton, New Jersey and New York City. She teaches Devi Yoga, a form of inner work which combines the ancient wisdom of the yogic tradition with the modern sensibility of archetypal psychology. For more information on resources in the Hindu yogic tradition, contact her at suzingreen@mindspring.com. Look for her upcoming web site at www.suzingreen.com.

have the lacy elegance of the asparagus fern, the lush foliage of the ficus, the sexy glamour of the gardenia. It grew slowly, rather humbly, and for two years never showed a bud. Until, by chance, I happened to transplant it.

I was repotting some other plants that day and thought I'd transfer it from its little green container into one of my newly-emptied, large clay pots. This was an aesthetic decision. I preferred the look of red clay to green plastic. The plant looked way too small for the pot; however, within a week it doubled in size. Soon after that the buds came.

There was clearly a lesson here about room to grow, benign neglect, and not seeing what is right before one's eyes. Nevertheless, the plant forgave my triple sin of omission. Within three weeks of the transplant, it greeted me with an incredible flower, brilliant red, five perfect petals opening to the morning. It was only then that I realized this plant was a hibiscus. And that it had something to teach me about tending living things.



Joyce Setala

We lived in rural New England and those beautiful red blooms were a treasure during the cold dark days of winter. The hibiscus accompanied us when we moved from a house by a river to a house by a field, and finally, in a most unexpected change of lifestyle, to a house in a subdivision in central New Jersey.

New Jersey is something like a crowded pot. A small state crammed with people, automobiles, condominiums, corporate parks, and shopping malls, there is too much of everything man-made here. The land is so fertile it is called the "Garden State," a cruel irony as family farms, lush wetlands, open fields, and woodlands all give way to "commercial development," a benign-sounding phrase for the mindless destruction of the earth. New Jersey is a seriously overcrowded pot with all the problems of overcrowding and it was here in New Jersey that disaster struck the hibiscus.

In the beginning it was just a couple of tiny white flies. The plant had lived through many seasons. It was strong, vital, and so good-natured I was sure it would peacefully co-exist with these little specks of insect life. This was not to be. Little by little the white flies took over and I could see it weakening. I tried everything. Natural remedies. Toxic remedies. Everyone had a suggestion. Nothing worked. The bugs multiplied. The plant diminished.

My heart broke as I watched my beautiful hibiscus slowly wither and start to die. I could barely go near it, feeling I had failed, that by allowing this plant to die I had broken a promise to it and to myself: to be a careful nurturer of life.

March, April, May. We brought all the houseplants outside for the warm season. By now, the leaves of the hibiscus were shriveled and dry, the white flies circling all around it. I knew it was dying, but since I could not

bring myself to toss it into the weed pile, I set it outside with the others. That was when I heard the voice, clear, direct, without a trace of pity. *Cut it back. Remove everything but the lowest stumps. Leave only one leaf. Do not wait a moment longer. Do it now.*

It felt like certain murder, but I know this voice. I think of it as my *Kali* voice. Over the years I've learned to pay it serious attention. I got my pruning shears and started cutting, singing a chant from the Indian goddess tradition, the *Hymn to the Great Mother*, with each cleave of the blades.

Salutations to you in the form of Consciousness, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Intelligence, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Power, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Forgiveness, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Peace, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Beauty, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Good Fortune, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Compassion, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Contentment, cut. Salutations to you in the form of Mother, cut.

The deed was done. I looked at my beautiful hibiscus, shorn of her leaves and branches, and remembered the old Sumerian story of *Inanna's* descent to the Underworld. She must leave behind her crown, beads, breastplate, gold ring, measuring rod, and royal robe, until she is "naked and bowed low."

The hibiscus, like *Inanna*, was "naked and bowed low." With nothing left to feed on, the white flies disappeared. The hibiscus sat for about a month, a few dead stumps rising from a large clay pot. Every time I looked at it, I too felt "naked and bowed low." Then one day in mid-June, I saw a tiny spot of green pushing out of the central stem. By July the stumps were covered with small green leaves.

The hibiscus lived.

By August it was rounder, fuller, lusher, than ever before. It seemed to have a new vitality, like it knew something it hadn't known before. Or maybe it was me who knew something I hadn't known before. Something about roots and the power of darkness. Something about how even when we think nothing is happening, something is happening.

Then the buds began. Whereas before, the hibiscus might put out five or six blossoms at a time, now it was

covered with flowers. It had come back, glorious, an explosion of red vermillion. That was when I knew it was *Kali* come to teach me about death as a doorway to life; about the power of descent; about the wisdom of the sword when we wield it with the compassionate touch of the Mother. A gardener might say it was simply a matter of proper pruning. For me it was more than that. I'd watched the

hibiscus return from the mouth of death, radiant, resplendent, alive.

The story goes that *Kali* comes into the world during a war between the gods, who represent truth, and the demons, who represent everything that keeps us from living in truth—our inclinations towards fear, unworthiness, self-doubt, addiction . . . to name just a few. The battlefield is really the psyche. The demons are winning until the Great Goddess *Durga* comes on the scene. At the peak of the fighting she calls on her most potent aspect, *Kali*, who leaps from *Durga*'s brow and charges onto the killing ground, destroying the demon army.

*It was Kali
come to
teach me
about death
as a
doorway to
life.*

Much as I delight in this image of the fierce feminine, ridding the psyche of troubling demons, my favorite part of the story comes at the end. *Kali* has won the battle; however, she is so immersed in her dance of destruction — she is after all on a mission—she is unaware the job is done. This is a problem because if she continues dancing, she will destroy the entire world. Fortunately her consort, the god *Shiva*, knows what to do. Taking the form of a tiny baby, he lies down on the battlefield. As soon as *Kali* sees this tender infant, she stops and, cradling it to her breast, begins to nurse. Death gives way to new life. I love this image of the fierce goddess, surrounded by the ten thousand demon corpses she has just slaughtered, quietly suckling a baby.

Cutting back my hibiscus was a fierce act. I had to let go of blame and self-pity, heed a powerful inner voice, take a chance on a bunch of dead stubs in a pot. I had to trust in the mysterious darkness. This is the *Kali* work, cutting away that which is dead, diseased, bug-ridden, finished, blocking our way—severing the ties that bind us.

Ultimately, of course, all is *Kali*, all is the Mother. The hibiscus, the white flies, the gods, the demons, the beautiful, the terrible, the eternal cycle of life, death, and transformation. She spits us out of her womb and eats us back inside it, over and over again.

When we don't know how to see her, *Kali* can be quite terrifying. In Indian religious art she is often pictured wearing a garland of skulls and skirt of severed arms. Her hair is wild, her tongue sticks out, she holds a severed head in one of her many hands. She is the embodiment of the fierce feminine, protectress of the heart, come to wrest us from all that keeps us from our Truth. Some say there is none who is more compassionate.



Janet Kerr

I have learned much from my journey with the hibiscus. That things are rarely what they seem. That the plain and simple are often a mask for beauty and power. That one should never underestimate the power of roots. That we animal folk are not so different from plants.

We need room to grow. We need fresh air, warm sun, good food, clean water, and most of all, we need love. Sometimes that love is fierce, rising up to safeguard our time or creativity or purpose, our loved ones or community. When the white flies start buzzing around, zapping our vitality and strength, covering us with a veil of torpor and forgetfulness, that is the time to call on *Kali*.

Kali is the fierce energy of the psyche, the light of discrimination, the sword of wisdom, the power to recognize what must be done and to do it. *Kali's* sword shapes and refines our lives, honing and sculpting us, making order out of *chaos*, showing us the meaning, beauty, and purpose of our lives. The sword in the hands of *Kali* is good and just. It is not the sword of violence and cruelty. *Kali's* sword is the compassionate blade of the Mother.

Kali is also the fertile darkness, the deep dark void, the ever-changing cycles of time. She teaches us through every phase, if we will only open up our ears and hearts and eyes and really listen.

I like to imagine myself and the hibiscus as one. I close my eyes and feel my roots reaching down into the earth, spreading out deeper and deeper, holding me in the embrace of rocks, dust, sand, loam, peat, mold, clay, earthworms, leeches, ants, beetles, lice, underground fertility, feeding me its life. I see my leaves and branches rising from the ground, covered in red and green profusion, each of my flowers an offering to the same life

force that has pushed me up from itself and will pull me back down into it again. I feel the warmth of the sun, sweet touch of the earth, fresh taste of water, and know that all of this, earth, water, fire, and air, is all of me. The tea I drank for breakfast, soup I ate for lunch, all the plants that made it, heat that cooked it, all of it is Her becoming me and me becoming Her. So tending my hibiscus, I tend it lovingly, as I try to tend myself and all with whom I come in contact, remembering that we are all one living presence of the Goddess, who is everywhere, in everything, the very stuff from which this universe is made.

Lady of the Plants, they say you are in everything and I know this is true because when I close my eyes and really listen, I hear your deep song singing from my heart, holding me through countless seasons, from seed to bud to bloom and back to seed again.

Note: Suzin Green's knowledge of the Hindu yogic tradition is rooted in nearly two decades of living in ashrams and centers of the Siddha Yoga master, Baba Muktananda. In Devi Yoga, Devi represents the sacred feminine realm of being, while Yoga represents the sacred masculine realm of doing.

This article was originally published in the Spring, 1998 Sage Woman magazine. Since then it has been posted on many web sites and has been read by thousands of people all over the world. It was recently reprinted in Yoga Chicago magazine.

SPIRITUALITY & EVERYDAY LIFE



Living in Metaphor

Ann E. Hossler

We humans are creatures of metaphor. We do not need a high school English teacher to tell us the concept of one symbolic thing standing for another, only to give us the word. For we understand early that to feel "low" is to feel unhappy and depressed, not to feel physically closer to the center of the earth. To say that a time is "long" is to know that a slice of life takes many minutes or days or years, not that it takes many measures of a physical yardstick.



Yet this deep and natural knowing that we are born with, this ability to translate physical traits into other dimensions, is not recognized in this left-brained world of the early 21st century. Struggle against it or not, I know

Ann Hossler currently serves as organist to a United Methodist church in Mt. Gretna, PA. Her spiritual journey has taken her through the traditions of the Evangelical United Brethren, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalist, Episcopal, and Quaker. Along the way, she has developed a deep love for the spiritual practices of chanting, lectio divina, sacred pilgrimage, and labyrinth walking. Ann is blessed to share her life with her wonderful husband Bob, two cockatiels, and nine amazing cats.

that I, along with the billions of others who share this planet, have been shaped by the societal understandings embedded in our world of the late 20th century, a world that is fundamentally scientific and rational and economic. We judge by what we can sense and by what we can explain. Financial terms often define value because they are tangible, because we can see them and count them and compare them. We have faith in the concrete and the measurable. Intuitive knowing is illogical and uncomfortable, so we are skeptical of it, not trusting its truth. We are children of our age.

And yet recently, I find that I am returning to that innate knowing that expresses itself in metaphor and in symbol. I cannot deny the deep beauty that I find in the world or the power of coincidence in my life or the sense of an intuitive reality quite beyond what science can explain and hold. I cannot deny my soaring love of music and language, my passionate connection with springtime, my overwhelming reverence for the sacred places of the world. Science cannot measure or explain the emotional power of beauty or music. But a lack of objective evaluation does not make the power less.

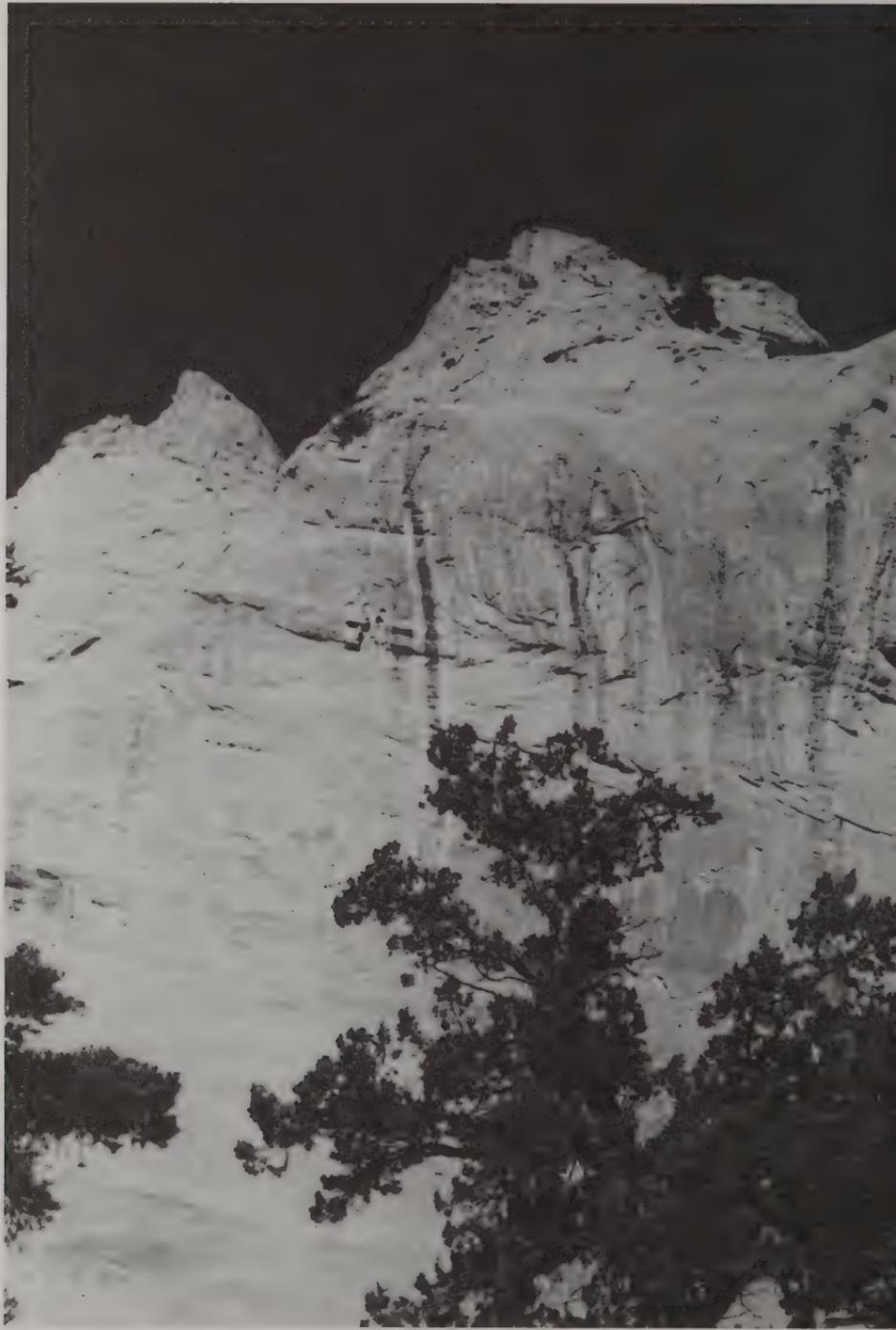
My world is made meaningful not by what I can evaluate and define, but by what I can appreciate and adore. I find there is a profound difference in what I find interesting and what I find important. It is interesting that a tree stands five stories high; it is important that a tree grows as a living partner on the earth with me. Science is interesting; life is important.

One of the ways that I have found to incorporate both interest and importance is to allow myself to see life in symbol, to let reality take on a resonance beyond what can be measured and defined. In embracing this symbolic

mode of being, I free myself to explore meanings beyond the tangible, to see magic in the mundane. This is not quite the same kind of symbolism of the past that saw human evil in the failing of a crop or divine punishment in the sickness of a child. My symbolism sees analogies and connections, sees comparisons and lessons in the simple path of living.

Walking the labyrinth was a birthing place for my growing awareness of the power of living in metaphor. I have been present with hundreds of first-time walkers now, and so many of them comment on their profound understanding of the walk through the labyrinth path as a walk through their lives. Issues of death and birth, of control and surrender, of trust and change—whatever fundamental life issues walkers bring to the path—are the life insights that rise up to hold them. Experiencing again and again the power of being taught about life through the symbol, the metaphor, of the labyrinth, opened me up to learning life lessons through the symbols that surround me all the time in my walk through the everyday world.

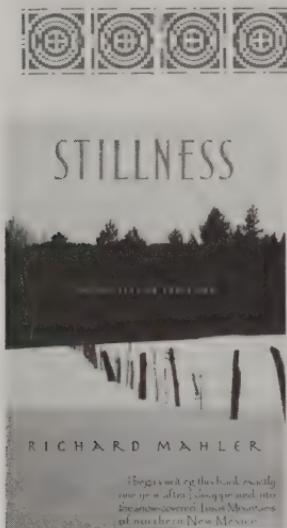
I see a symbol in a budding lilac in the snow—a symbol of life amidst difficulties, of different facets of beauty, of the interconnection of winter and spring. I see a symbol in honking horns in traffic—a symbol of impatience amidst hopelessness, of different facets of power, of the interconnection of individual and situational control. I see a symbol in graffiti—a symbol of identity amidst technology, of different facets of expression, of the interconnection of desecration and empowerment. Everything I see can teach me a lesson, can guide me to a wiser life, can make me appreciate nuances of existence. Everything can be a symbol. Everything is what it is and more than what it is. I glory in this transformed life of layered possibility.





Robert F. Campbell

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED



STILLNESS: Daily Gifts of Solitude,
by Richard Mahler; published by Red
Wheel/Weiser, LLC, 2003, 176 pages,
hard cover. Reviewed by Michele
Naphen.

"I began writing this book exactly one year after I disappeared into the snow-covered Tusas Mountains of northern New Mexico . . ."

We are invited to share in Richard Mahler's experience of a three-month sojourn of quiet, stillness, and solitude. Mahler became the winter caretaker of a ranch that was eight miles from the nearest paved road and five miles from the closest neighbor, in a season when snowstorms often blocked the way in and out. He had no cell phone, computer, or television; his only means of communication with the outside world was a radio-linked telephone. He describes how he filled that time, or rather, how it filled him.

STILLNESS is part memoir and part discourse and Mahler intersperses entries from his daily journal throughout. For example, on Day 9, he writes: "My days are satisfying and full, even without the many urban distractions—from mail to movies—that I still sometimes miss. At night, when the winds are calm, the silence is complete and enveloping. The land feels asleep and at rest

... And the starry sky is stunning. I have discovered the small but intense pleasures of this simple life."

Mahler draws from his own study of the world's faith traditions, showing how some form of silent, contemplative activity is at the heart of both ancient and modern spiritual practices. He describes the monastic life of a group of devout, early Christians known as Desert Fathers; he notes that Jesus retreated into the wilderness to pray and reflect; he reminds us that silent meditation is the foundation of Buddhist practice; he quotes from Mahatma Ghandi, Achaan Chah (a Thai Buddhist monk), and Lao-Tzu (an early founder of Taoism); and he cites the contemplative practices of people of the Jewish, Islamic, and Sufi traditions.

He strongly makes the case that time for silence and stillness, even for a few minutes in the midst of our hectic lives, is not a luxury but a necessity for our physical, mental, and spiritual health. He acknowledges that most of us are not able, or even willing, to undertake an extended retreat. Instead, he offers numerous suggestions for how to fit what he calls "quiet alone-time" into our daily schedules, and encourages us to find our own ways of creating these opportunities.

The book contains facts and figures that show just how much we, as individuals and as a society, have sped up, and the damage this pace is causing to the quality of our lives and our health. "While the rest of the natural world is trying to move at the same rate it always has, human beings are trying to match the speed of the machines they have created," Mahler writes. He summarizes studies that provide evidence for the benefit of regular doses of quiet alone-time as the antidote to this unnatural pace of living, with results such as: lower incidence of hypertension and

heart disease; stronger immune systems; easing of headaches, anxiety, and panic attacks; and increased receptivity to spiritual, religious, or mystical experiences. He also quotes other writers on their own retreat experiences, and includes an index of extensive resources for exploring silence and solitude.

Mahler doesn't omit the challenges and pitfalls of his experience. "It seems ironic that even when I yearn to do 'nothing,' I feel compelled to 'do' something with that nothingness. This is the way humans drive themselves crazy." But for the author, the outcome is profound. It is clear that cultivating a practice of stillness, simplicity, and solitude has changed his life, and he believes it can change ours too.

"One of the most useful outcomes of inhabiting quiet alone-time is that it helps us develop a kind of clear seeing . . . We show kindness and compassion not only to ourselves but to everyone around us."

Mahler asks us, "Are you ready to join me in a softer, less frantic way of life, an existence that's simpler, yet offers more? Each of us can achieve this."

Richard Mahler is a writer who lives in Santa Fe. He has written widely about travel, the environment, spirituality, and the arts. He also teaches a form of stress reduction that relies on meditation and yoga.

Michele Naphen is the editorial assistant for SACRED JOURNEY. She is a writer and clinical social worker who uses mindfulness meditation practices in her work.

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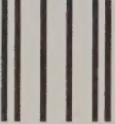
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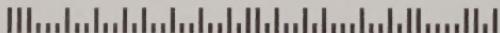
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